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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/13/2019  
TAGS: CE KAWC PGOV PHUM PREL SMIG UN  
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: UN UNDERSECRETARY GENERAL HOLMES  
WELCOMES RECENT PROGRESS ON IDP RETURNS

Classified By: SCA A/S ROBLAKE

11. (C) SUMMARY: United Nations (UN) Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs told Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake November 5 that he was encouraged by the recent progress on the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Sri Lanka. Holmes plans to travel to Sri Lanka in late November and will be prepared to issue more supportive public statements as progress continues. He noted that the resettlement process has not been very well organized, as UN agencies have had to scramble to keep up, due to the lack of advanced notification from the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) on returns. He described the UN relationship with the GSL as "difficult," while at the same time noting international NGO accusations that the UN has gotten too close to the government. Holmes was somewhat pessimistic that the GSL would do anything credible on accountability, but said the UN is prepared to give it time to try, perhaps six months. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Meeting with SCA A/S Blake in Washington November 5, repeat title Holmes said he was encouraged by the recent progress on IDP returns in Sri Lanka. (NOTE: This recent acceleration of returns has reduced the total number of IDPs to approximately 188,000, according to most recent Embassy Colombo reporting, down from 250,000 only a few weeks ago. Approximately 19,000 have been released to join host family and friends, while the rest have been resettled, primarily in Jaffna and Mannar, but also in recent post-conflict areas in the North, such as in Mullaitivu. END NOTE.) Holmes surmised that if Sri Lanka could reduce the number of IDPs to about 150,000 - a number that has been identified as a level sufficiently decongested to avoid a humanitarian crisis when monsoon rains begin - it will have "changed the dynamic." He noted that he plans to travel to Sri Lanka in about three weeks and would have more positive things to say publicly if progress continues. Blake noted that he too plans to visit December 6-8, and that a little encouragement to the Sri Lankans is important to keep them moving in the right direction.

13. (C) Holmes noted concerns with how returns are being carried out. While reports from UNHCR have been reasonably

encouraging, the numbers are often difficult to track and the process not very well organized. There is often no advance notification before the government undertakes to return large groups of IDPs to their home districts. Nonetheless, UNHCR, WFP and the GSL have worked reasonably well together to ensure that returnees are provided with assistance to help them at least start to rebuild their lives; the situation for returnees is invariably better than camp confinement. Holmes noted that he would seek to get a better sense of the resettlement when he visits Mannar, during his upcoming trip. Blake inquired about overall UN-GSL relations; Holmes said they were "difficult," and noted the GSL tendency to engage selectively with certain UN agencies. At the same time, he noted INGO accusations that the UN has grown too close to the government.

#### ACCOUNTABILITY

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¶4. (C) According to Holmes, the UN has told the GSL that "if you do not do something (on accountability), (the UN) will have to." He did not provide a timetable, but suggested around six months, i.e. until elections, for the GSL to initiate a credible process, such as beginning an evidence-collection effort. The Sri Lankans would need some time to do the "right thing," and he suggested that a truth and reconciliation-type process would be more effective than a judicial process. He said he was encouraged by GSL dialogue with the parliamentary opposition Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and with Tamil Diaspora representatives. Blake noted U.S. efforts to quietly push the GSL and Diaspora toward engagement with each other. He underscored that the GSL needs to talk to its critics, not just pro-government Tamils, particularly on what form of accountability process the country will pursue; it is not clear to us what degree of importance Sri Lankan Tamils attach to accountability versus other priorities, such as IDP returns. One useful step would be allowing camp residents to organize themselves politically, but this has not happened, Blake commented.

#### RECONSTRUCTION

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¶5. (C) Blake asked if UN plans were moving forward on reconstruction, noting that a U.S. decision to assist with reconstruction would require additional progress on IDP returns and related issues over the next few months. Holmes said the government has not shared its overall reconstruction plan and likely does not have one. Blake suggested that key Colombo-based Ambassadors and the UN Mission Director should begin to consult on the benchmarks, i.e., paramilitary disbandment, participatory local elections, and a reduced military presence, that would allow the donor community to move forward on reconstruction. But appointing (pro-government Tamil paramilitary EPRD Chief) Douglas Devananda to a position of political power in the North would dampen U.S. enthusiasm for reconstruction support, he cautioned.

CLINTON